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RUEHBUL/AMEMBASSY KABUL PRIORITY 1400  
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C O N F I D E N T I A L TASHKENT 000703

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TAGS: PREL PGOV ECON PHUM UZ  
SUBJECT: LOCAL RESIDENTS SING THE K2 BLUES

Classified By: Amb. Jon R. Purnell for reasons 1.4 (b,d).

¶1. (C) Summary: The forced departure of the U.S. military from the Karshi-Khanabad (K2) airbase immediately affected hundreds of local area workers who depended on the generous wages. According to the head Imam of Kashkadaryo Province, the loss of jobs and humanitarian support has impacted the citizens of Khanabad the most. Many of the educated workers with strong English skills from Karshi and other large cities have moved on to U.S. bases in Afghanistan or to Tashkent for employment.

¶2. (C) In a recent discussion with poloff, Karshi Imam Ismoil Raihonov stated that the departure of U.S. forces from Uzbekistan affected the citizens of Khanabad, the small village adjacent to the base, far greater than anyone else. Before the Americans arrived, unemployment was widespread and the infrastructure was decrepit throughout the village. For more than ten years, the village had relied on trucks to bring fresh drinking water several times a day until the U.S. Army donated funds to purchase equipment and renovate a water pumping station. With talks of repaving the main streets and renovating the elementary school, residents of Khanabad had high hopes for continued relations with the Americans stationed at K2. Additionally, hundreds of residents were employed as laborers on the base providing a number of services in support of the American soldiers. It was estimated that each worker supported an extended family with salaries two or three times the norm. At present, the Imam said, villagers face the daunting task of pleading for government support to improve living conditions in the area, and unemployment has resurfaced as one of the largest social problems plaguing the small village. He noted that the fence that surrounded Khanabad, erected by the Uzbek military as an additional layer of security for the base, was removed after the Americans pulled out.

¶3. (C) Other contacts have told poloff that skilled employees, such as interpreters, mechanics, and cafeteria and laundry workers have found employment in Afghanistan and, to a lesser extent, in Tashkent. Many were hired by American, Turkish, and German companies. While some are allowed to live on the U.S. bases down in Afghanistan, others must accept additional risks and live in towns nearby. One such base employee said that on top of dealing with the dangers of living in Afghanistan, "everyone would prefer to be working closer to their families, but we have no other choice" as the job market in Uzbekistan continues to dry up. There has been anecdotal evidence of laborers traveling to Afghanistan in search of work, but it is unclear just how many have been willing to work in the hazardous environment.

¶4. (C) Comment: It is unclear whether the former employees of K2 are aware of the political wrangling that led to the eviction of U.S. forces from the base. What is clear, however, is that just as their presence provided a significant boost to the local economy, the departure of American soldiers has left area residents back in the same desperate situation as their provincial neighbors. Post continues to see a trend of labor migration out of Uzbekistan but we have scant information about the numbers moving south into Afghanistan.

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